

The unemployed in the popular uprising of December, 2001: Report from Greater Buenos Aires



This moving account reveals some prominent facts behind the scenes of the December 2001 uprising in Argentina. Cacho's account reveals the political ideas and tactics of the unemployed, who throughout the 90s had managed to obtain public attention and increasing legitimacy in demanding government assistance by disrupting automobile traffic on highways across the entire territory. The [piqueteros](#) - the common label of various similar organizations - had coordinated their actions, not just among themselves, but also with the more traditional leftist movements, unions, and political parties.

December 24, 2001

Testing testing testing... Is it recording? Yes? Alright, I'm Cacho, we've already met, so let's get started...

I'll start by telling you how we got organized to head out to the plaza...

Thursday started out as a real shitty day for us... Of course, it was shitty for everyone, right? What with all the things that have been happening... But I say it was a shitty day for us, us unemployed who had won a jobs plan in the courts of the streets, because after the demonstrations that we had been doing until a week before to get the payments before Christmas, the provincial government had announced the pay rate just that morning. And just imagine, with all the tough times no one wanted to run the risk that they stop paying in the middle of the morning for lack of cash, like they've done other times. So because this might happen we were definitely heading to the bank, like we had the month before. So we went to the bank first thing in the morning. Someone had a transistor radio, and in the crowd in front of the bank we were trying to find out what was going on in the Plaza de Mayo. Those of us in the movement had agreed the day before to meet at two in the afternoon in our community centre, all the *compañeros* from the different neighbourhoods of the area that were part of the movement. Pretty smart, right? And I, in the middle of the morning, I thought the plaza was going to fill up with people, peacefully I thought, maybe a hundred thousand, two hundred thousand people giving hell to those bastards until they left office, but I never imagined what was about to happen.

Fine, we were demonstrating without any problems, and I left the bank for the shack in the encampment. I gave them, same as every month, 140 patacones to Zulma, because they pay us in patacones, you know? This bastard Ruckauf pays in vouchers, and he might even become president... I gave the patacones to my wife, because we knew she had to go right away and pay up our accounts at the stores and at the kiosk that gave us the food on credit. Between these debts and the little bit of money we gave to my brother-in-

law who isn't even on the unemployment rolls, so he could feed his three kids, we hardly had twenty patacones left for each of us, me and my wife, for cigarettes and for another "luxury," like a pair of chickens for special occasions... It's the same every month, the money from cashing the check lasts two or three days, what with the food we can get on months, we get something from the city from marching and demonstrating, and that's how our children are able to eat. Anyway, the oldest of my kids, Jorgito, who's 15, he helps a little in the house, he goes around picking up useful junk from the streets, so his other four brothers and sisters can eat... When I see the kid having to go out with his junk cart, and I remember, not too long ago, three years ago, when I was still working in the paper mill and for these holidays I gave the boy some pocket money, I don't know, I'm telling you, tears come to my eyes, tears of impotence. But then I get a hold of myself by thinking of all the *compañeros*, in the last fight we had, and I think about how the next one will be. This time, the next one was near, it was going to be that afternoon. "Keep the anger inside until then, Cachito," I told myself, inside. "You've got to take out the anger all at once when we're with the *compañeros*, face to face with those *hijos de puta*," I told myself, as I do every time I get this anguish inside, right in the heart, and I try right then to change the anger into something else. And like César said in the meeting, "*Compañeros*, you've got to change the anger into getting organized!" So let's go back to the plaza. I was telling you that I went by the shack to leave the money with Zulma, I was with the kids for awhile, and then I went to the community centre where we were meeting.

It was still 12:30 in the afternoon, and there were already *compañeros* there. A few had come from the local high school. They give us a hand with scholarly support and literacy training for the adults in the neighbourhood, and this time they wanted to go to the plaza with us. Some people hadn't even eaten, so we shared a milanesa sandwich that they were selling at the store, two for a peso. I think it was Aldo who thought of bringing the TV from his house to the community centre, because since we were all there together, it was good to stay informed. Heading over to the centre, already on the corner, Don Cosme, who never gets involved with anything, he told me the authorities had beaten the march down that morning at the plaza, and he wanted to know what we were going to do. I invited him to the meeting, even though it was almost a sure thing he wouldn't come, I invited him anyway. And there we started putting together the information puzzle: Each of us said what he had heard the day before, and we were following what was happening on the TV. I think it was Santiago who said: "Look, those bastards on channel 13 are talking about an uprising, about widespread rage, when just yesterday they were defending the government and weren't giving any coverage when we had been on the highways blocking traffic for 12 days." That's how the political discussion was going until the meeting.

All right, I'll tell you about the meeting, because a lot of the stuff we were talking about before, we talked about again there. In reality, when a ton of *compañeros* really started coming, a little after two, we saw on TV that the authorities were repressing the demonstration again: As they were making their horses trample the Madres, more *compañeros* kept on coming to the community centre. And when they started with the nightsticks, hitting the boys and girls who wanted to resist non-violently in the plaza, all this more or less at two o'clock, more and more *compañeros* were coming. So the TV images showed that things were getting pretty heavy in the plaza, and a lot of us, I'm sure that other *compañeros* felt the same way I did, we had mixed feelings. Because, on the one hand, we knew that the most serious of us, the *compañeros* who always are at the front of the demonstrations, a lot of the neighbourhood delegates, we would go to the plaza no matter what. But, on the other hand, we also knew and understood that other *compañeras* and *compañeros*, some of the older people, would be scared off by the brutal images we were all watching on TV.

Now that the question of fear is on the table, I'll tell you: the announcement that the state of siege had been imposed, just the afternoon before. I think it doesn't have the same effect in one of the neighbourhoods of the capital, like Palermo for example, as it does in one of our barrios, or in la villa, as they say. Over here, everyone knows that we're protesters, the neighbours know it and so do the military police in the zone, the political leaders of the city who the neighbours are rebelling against more and

more since they joined the movement, and that's why the political leaders are so mad at us. And above all the cops from the commissary in the zone, the renegade police of their class, because in most cases they live in barrios like ours. But the police force, they give you an ideology of hating the people—I don't know, they think they're better than we are, even though you can bet they have a brother-in-law or a brother who's in the same boat we are. But in the police force they turn people into killers, practically, because they seem to really enjoy shooting with impunity the beggars and vagrants in the neighbourhood... These cops hate us with this barbaric anger, and they were happy with the state of siege: They thought that now they were really going to give it to us. That's why the cacerolazos the night before, which were very important in breaking the fear and starting to turn the tables on the hijos de puta who rule, these cacerolazos took place in the middle-class neighbourhoods, mostly in the barrios of Buenos Aires and in the community centres, right? Not even we are so crazy as to go out in the middle of the night, not with the cast-iron pots or with anything, while the cops were patrolling our neighbourhoods eager to grab us and rough us up, like they did that night! So it was like a very important part in those two days of struggle: A lot of unemployed people's movements like ours, were turning up the heat and the anger with the demonstrations in the big supermarkets of multinational capital. Because we didn't go to the little stores in the neighbourhood to raise hell, you know. We only went to the big supermarkets, where you have the big multinationals who are sucking the blood out of the country. We always talk about that in the organizational meetings of the movement. Those of us who have been keeping the struggle going for a while, like I was saying, that night we were waiting, expectant, but not going out. And the middle class, which until now hadn't gone out to show their anger in a mass demonstration, took on our role for the night, or rather, they took up the fight, didn't they? Stepping out with the pots and pans heading to the Plaza de Mayo and to Congress, even with all the repression that there was late that night... But fine, it was Thursday at two in the afternoon, we were all feeling that "this state of siege is a pain in the ass," like they were singing the night before and we were singing then.

This time the meeting was real short. First we heard the strong opinions, I'll tell you a few of them. For example, Quito, who's twenty-something, a little younger than I am—I'm thirty-two—he said with a passion I'd never seen before:

Quote:

We were just seeing on the TV that those cops, hijos de puta, were driving their horses over the old women, loco, and we made a deal with the Madres two weeks ago, that we would back them up in the struggle. So if they messed with those old ladies it's like they messed with our grandmothers, loco, I'm going to stick my neck out for them.

He always says, loco, and he just started to say compañeros. Alright, Quito was on fire, he was still wound up from the resistance march, which the unemployed people's movement shared with the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo. Before then, Quito didn't even know who the Madres were. But since we did a few demonstrations together with them, and he realized he could call them, in a friendly way, his "old ladies," he took them on like a banner of struggle and dignity. Afterward, I told them all about the 1,810 people who in this same plaza had started the May revolution, and that we needed a new revolution now, and that that's what I was going for, to give birth to a new revolution. They all gave me applause, but now I think I got out of control a bit. Because I think that beyond all the heroism there was that afternoon in the fighting at the plaza, because it was a real people's fight, beyond all the heroism, like I was saying, I think that the people taken together still aren't mature enough for a revolution, you know? Because, when they were shooting at us like crazy, we didn't even have a Molotov cocktail to defend ourselves with! I'll tell you more about that later... But at the time that's how it felt, I'm not going to lie. The meeting was short, as I was saying, because as we saw what was going on, a lot of compañeros and compañeras said "Enough words, it's time to head out."

The only thing we had to resolve was the frightened feeling that a lot of compañeras and compañeros had. "I always go to the demonstrations with my three kids, and now I'd like to go there with my compañeros, but I don't have anyone to leave the kids with, and I'm afraid to go out with them," said this one thin compañera in the group, and a lot of people agreed. The one who cleared up the situation was Juan, which is strange, because he's sometimes such an asshole with the compañeros, but this time he said it right:

Quote:

Compañeros, I think this time it's not a matter of us voting, or even trying to convince a single compañero. It's a shitty situation, and we're seeing on the TV that those of us who were heading out, we knew we would be out there in the tear gas and the flying bullets. And I'm not saying that to scare you, but just so we're conscious of what we're getting into. The people are out there playing ball to get rid of those hijos de puta, we'd have to string them up right there in the plaza so they learn once and for all. The movement has to be present there, because we're always in the fight for dignity. Those of us who feel we have to go and that the anger and the rage are stronger than the fear, let's go. And those who have to stay, know that you'll have compañeros in the plaza, putting their shoulder to the wheel for all of us!

More applause. It was great to see the power that these compañeros were transmitting, who sometimes, because they're better talkers, are the ones who end up saying in the meeting what everyone's thinking. And this power, I don't know how to explain it, this power makes the blood warm up inside, I don't know, but I felt stronger than ever. The old lady, who's half blind and half-deaf, asked when she saw us leave, "Is this is to protect the jobs plan?" And Marisa answered her: "This fight is for social change, compañera!" Between the preparations for heading out, we were getting organized. I had to coordinate security with Toto and Leo, but the truth is that we had never been before in such a situation of conflict as the one that was ahead...

Sandra, who is always attentive to organizing, took charge of taking down the name and document number of everyone who was going, to check that everyone got back, and she looked up the telephones of the human rights lawyers to have with her. She told us she'd stay at home all afternoon, to make any calls that had to be made. Coco, who couldn't go, offered her brother's cell phone to the compañeros who were going so they could get in touch if there were any problems. Me I didn't know what to tell the compañeros who were asking me if they should bring sticks, or a bag full of rubble, or tacks... But right away, thinking over the situation with the compañeros, we saw that if we ran into a police checkpoint along the way we'd all be screwed. So in the end all we brought was the handkerchiefs to cover the face, some slingshots we could hide under our clothes, and a lot of guts, a lot of moxie. And a lot of heart.

To go to the plaza we had to go, from the other end of the Avenida, the bus terminal that goes to the centre of town. Other times we had already arranged with the drivers that they take us until the Plaza de Mayo without paying, and we thought they'd do it this time too. The surprise came when we headed out to the terminal. I hadn't seen the list, but right then I realized we were a ton of people! We even had to tell Rosa, who's got serious respiratory problems, that she really shouldn't go! All right, she came anyway, like René and Sixto, two old guys from the next barrio, workers their whole lives, who should have been retired at the age of seventy, but weren't because their old company's didn't support them and left them hanging. Now the old guys are in the jobs programs like us, but I'm telling you they have more strength and guts than a lot of the twenty-year-old youngsters, who because they're into drugs have less stamina than the oldsters. So good, they all wanted to come anyway. What are you going to do? Don Sixto, a man of few words who was talking with us, he came up to me in the bus and said: "When I was fifteen, I went with my father on October 17."¹ Like that, that's all he said. He went back to his seat and went back to looking out the window. The old man had been there on October 17, and now, when he talked to me, his eyes were really shining! I have to tell you, my legs were shaking on that trip to the plaza. Not if they ran me over with a tank were those cops going to stop me! All the same, we were barely out of the bus, six blocks from the plaza, and we were already breathing the teargas, and we spoke to them, to the old guys and to Rosa,

and told them to go back... A little sad, but knowing they wouldn't be able to take the gases and the shoving, Don Sixto gave me a handshake that gave me like two thousand kilos of energy. But wait now, still in front of the plaza, like I'm telling you, we were a ton of people, who aside from the old guys and Rosa, we were all young guys or young women. With the conditions of the state of siege that we had before in our barrios, we had to walk the last few blocks to the terminal really carefully, holding back the urge to sing that song about how they can shove the state of siege up their ass... Arriving at the terminal, two patrols on the street realize we're there, and four cops come out of each van. They're holding their weapons and making like they're ready to fire. Listen up all you people without experience: These guys must have been there to scare off looters, so if I told them we're going to the Plaza de Mayo they aren't going to do anything. Luckily the bus drivers at the terminal made us board different buses really quickly, so they wouldn't notice the crowd as much, and then we got out. As soon as we got out, we asked the bus driver about the position that the Union of Bus Drivers, the UTA, was taking: They're in the CGT with Moyano. He told us,

Quote:

Like always, when things are getting hot they hide their heads. And later you'll see, they'll come out and say how great the People are and all that. They're the same bastards as the politicians.

Twenty blocks away, a patrol from Bonaerense crosses in front of the bus to stop it, they surround us pointing at the windows, and they shout at the driver: "Are you intern 147? Did they take your bus?" The vigilantes who saw us leave, they didn't react in time to stop us, but they warned another patrol by radio that they should stop us! And in one of these little actions that end up deciding a much bigger situation, the driver answers them "no," that in this bus it's all paying passengers, that the guy who took all the unemployed guys had gone by another route. After looking at us from outside, seeing the sad faces we were pulling, they believed the driver, they pulled out of the street and let us pass. What a great bus driver! That little action, and that of another passenger who wasn't going to the plaza but who was on our side, this reaffirmed that not only were we right, but that we had the full strength of the people behind us, the strength of the common worker like the bus driver, even the force of those who weren't even there. We felt all this strength in the fight to retake the Plaza de Mayo.

OK, I'm not going to tell you what happened in Buenos Aires that afternoon, you know that already, you were there or you read the newspapers. Although many times the media hide the way things really are. This is what our compañeros who stayed in the neighbourhood told us, that in the media they barely reported any of what we told them later, that they were talking about repression on one side and vandalism on the other, like it was the same old story of the two devils fighting each other that they used in the 1970s. But fine, I'll tell you a few things they didn't show on TV.

Once we made sure that the compañeros who had trouble running or breathing were going back, we looked for the Avenida de Mayo, thinking that this would be the direct way to get the plaza back. We were two blocks away, about 200, 300 people on each corner. And then, we had hardly arrived and, looking at all the compañeros out there, you know what I was thinking? In what we talk about sometimes in the movement, that we're all equal, that we don't want it to appear that there are leaders among us... There it was real clear that we were all equal. Of course sometimes it happens that some compañero is better at administrative things, or knows more about politics or has a better grip on relations with other organizations, or with the functionaries that we're negotiating with. But this isn't a way to define a leader. On the contrary, there has to be motivation for other people, many others, or better yet everyone, to learn and to educate ourselves to have this capacity. Because, look at this: We were all throwing rocks the same, and all exposed to the bullets the same. Sergio, who usually does the political relations for the movement, he was on the frontline, throwing pieces of rubble with so much force that it seemed like his arm was going to fly off with the rocks. In that moment I also thought that it was a privilege to be surrounded by

this kind of compañeros, and I went forward, my mind made up, the whole forty meters that separated me from the position where Sergio was at the barricade.

It's true what some of the papers were saying: Out there throwing stones and avoiding the teargas you had everyone from office workers to teachers, old guys and young kids. We were there, and so were some skinny dudes who looked like college types... That afternoon everyone who could come converged onto the plaza from the humble neighbourhoods of greater Buenos Aires, with the middle-class kids and bank workers, with no distinctions in the same trenches. Check it out, this one guy that we gave a lemon to so he could rub it on his face and stop the burning from the gas, we're running Don Chacabuco Street and the dude ducks in to an apartment building, he opens the door and tells us to come in. We were giving him a funny look, and he said that he lived there, and he was holding the door open for us so we could get out of the teargas. And living in an apartment in the centre of town, that isn't cheap, is it! So alright, what unified us there was the resistance in every street, in every barricade that we were reinforcing with the publicity posters and street signs, which were all state property or belonged to the banks or the multinational corporations. And if someone started smashing something that might belong to someone in particular, or breaking windows without checking who they might belong to, right away the majority of the people would stop him. I had already heard that that's how it had been in the Cordobazo, and I don't know how other people knew it, but it was something that the majority of the people there didn't let happen.

But at one moment, around four in the afternoon, we had already made with the barricades to half a block from the Cabildo, on the corner of the Plaza de Mayo. Going forward and then retreating when they threw the gas, just like the tide, but like a rising tide, always advancing. The barricades with dump trucks and the cables that we ran across the paths so they couldn't come in with the horses, these were good and solid, and the cops could only fire the gas to discourage us, but that well-built barricade was like a position already won. It was at that moment when the compañeros who were a hundred meters behind us started shouting, "They killed him, they killed him!" El Negro was on their corner, and he came running to tell us: In the last retreat from the gas, when some of the kids were paralyzed and couldn't run away, this one cop came off a motorcycle and went up to a kid who was trying to catch his breath, staring at the ground, and he shot the kid with his nine-millimetre pistol in the head. He shot him, just like I'm telling you! I was on the corner ahead, but El Negro, Santiago and the compañeros who were there saw it clearly. And here's where the rumour that they were shooting live rounds started. Other compañeros picked up the shells, and they were nine-millimetre. We got together, those of us that could, and talked about it, and thought about it: The fucking killers were going to break up the barricades with live rounds! From the corner where we were, we started to see the puddle of blood a hundred meters away.

I swear that the rage was shooting out of my eyes, which were already crying from the gas. But that reminded me, right there, of the idea I had that morning when I thought about my fifteen-year-old boy having to go out and scavenge the garbage with his cart. Hijos de puta! Fucking hijos de puta! The truth is I can't remember if I shouted it out loud or on the inside only, but I looked at the line of cops around the Cabildo and I think if anyone saw my face then they didn't need to hear me to know what I was feeling like. And you could tell right there, from the live rounds, that if necessary they were going to do anything to hold onto their power, I thought that they must have opened fire because they were shitting their pants and whoever gave the order, up there in the Casa Rosada, was shitting his pants even worse that we'd make it to the plaza, get inside the Rosada and string them up, which is what they deserved, like Juan said at the meeting. And then the next thing I was thinking was the idea of my kid who quit school in his second year to help out around the house, and I don't want that to happen to the other kids, get it? That's why I wanted to reach the plaza, I wanted to reach the plaza, so that the directors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) would see that when we've made up our minds they can't fuck with us anymore. And I even thought, when we're firing our own bullets, then they're going to see... But all right, there was more gas, we talked quickly among those of us who were on that street corner, some people were saying

we should go on the next parallel street, until someone said, I remember it clearly: “Stop, hermano. They’re shooting real bullets and we don’t even have a Molotov cocktail!”

OK, later they were saying that on the Avenida 9 de Julio there were a lot more people still coming, and we were staying back over there, via the street parallel to Avenida de Mayo, I don’t know what it’s called. In order to protect the barricades and the fires on each corner that we were leaving behind, so they couldn’t advance with the armoured cars or the motorcycles, we set fire to everything we came across. The first time I smashed up anything I could find, still thinking of the pool of blood back there coming from the *compañero* they shot back at Chacabuco and Avenida de Mayo, not even thinking about how my other four kids might finish high school and have a better future. That’s why I was setting things on fire, to tell you the truth. But on every corner you found someone, whether you knew him or not, who was marking the “objectives”: “This isn’t a family house, this is a private pension fund building,” for example, said this one skinny dude who looked like a college type. Later, by 9 de Julio, where things were a little quieter, if you can call it that, there was no shortage of people complaining about the violence, saying we didn’t have to break anything, that it should be a peaceful protest. I was calming down by then, but all the same this pissed me off. “Go tell the guy they shot dead that you want it to be peaceful, tell the owners of the Bank, who are robbing the country where there are kids dying of hunger, go talk about peace to the kids they shot yesterday in the provinces who went to look for food in the supermarkets!” I told him, and other things too.

Now we could regroup in the Avenida 9 de Julio, and check that we were all still there. We had spread out in different groups, some almost asphyxiated, other hurt by the rubber bullets, but now we were a little calmer. Over on 9 de Julio, which is a wider street, we caught our breath a little, and as we were setting fire to each barricade, we started bumping into people we knew, sometimes with the covered faces, groups of *compañeros* from other movements, militants from different sides, some teachers, a lot of people from the outskirts of greater Buenos Aires, and the tension from the first difficult hours of teargas and bullets was changing into happiness—because we were all realizing that we couldn’t make it to the Plaza de Mayo, but now all of Buenos Aires was in chaos. But stop, stop, because I don’t want to seem like I’m happy with the chaos. Chaos makes them think that by repressing us we’re going to stay nice and tame. This isn’t chaos for the sake of chaos, they just have to know that if they don’t respect us, if they don’t learn to respect the people, that no one can rest easy exploiting the people. That’s the message, it seems to me. The whole centre of Buenos Aires was up in smoke from the burning banks, and did you see how they left McDonald’s? And even in the farther street corners, you could see columns of black smoke marking that the same thing had happened to other places. A big guy, in his fifties, as he was helping to take the furniture out of this one bank’s head office to burn it in the street, shouted in front of the TV cameras, “These are Cavallo’s friends, the guys who ruin everything—let’s see now if they don’t respect us a little and get out of the country!” And later, he was making a big effort so the low-lives didn’t steal the computers from the bank. “We’re not stealing anything here, *compañeros*, let’s trash everything that they stole from the people, but let’s not start stealing because that’s not why we came, we came to throw the bastards out.” The lowlives are the bastards who steal wallets at the crowded train stations. I think they were surprised because someone had called them *compañeros*, or I don’t know why, but they started smashing the monitors and computers that before they wanted to take with them. I don’t know, but even though they’re talking about vandalism and all that, I think that there’s some justice in what happened, don’t you? I don’t know, sometimes they lose too. And they fear us, and respect us. So they know that when the people get fed up . . . how does that expression go? I think the great majority of us felt that the burning city was a response to so much oppression, so much bullshit, so much death and wasted time, and it finally exploded. That’s why I think, or I’m convinced, that what happened was an act of justice. You could call it people’s justice, right?

So right then I look for Dani, who always knows how to calculate the number of people at demonstrations, to ask him how many people he thought were there. Dani told me that what he saw out there on the

Avenida 9 de Julio alone must be some ten or fifteen thousand people. This professor comes up, who was listening, and tells us that there must be 80,000 people spread out from the San Telmo neighbourhood to the Avenida Santa Fe taking on this repression. 80,000 people! I don't know how to estimate these things, but it's possible, isn't it? So then the professor tells us, in a quiet moment, that not since the Tragic Week of 1919 had there been such a high level of popular struggle in the city centre, challenging the economic and political power structure. We were making history, and it wouldn't stop there, he told us.

OK, a while later, and it's already a little after 7, Sonia, who had the cell phone they had lent us, gets a call from Sandra, who was at the headquarters in the house watching TV. She tells us there are five dead, all from live rounds, that there have been more than 3,000 arrests, and that that idiot Fernando de la Rúa is about to resign. Beyond the news of the deaths and the wounded, of the fatigue and the latent threat of the armoured cars and the shooting, we all started to feel this struggle had been a victory. Right there I calmed down a little. Later, you know, the celebrations that came after the announcement that the government had come down, the unmarked police cars going down 9 de Julio firing into the crowd, the retreat to spend the night in the bus station. Here we had to control the euphoria a bit because now there were fewer people out, and the crowd was full of plainclothes policemen. We put together a little money, and once again with the complicity of the bus drivers, in spite of the strong police presence, a lot of us got on without bus tickets. The suspicion toward one passenger we thought might be a cop, this kept us happy until we got off near our neighbourhood. Fortunately nothing happened, and we all got home safe.

We went to the community warehouse, and back in the neighbourhood we let loose with our happiness. The compañeros were waiting for us there, and they received us with cheers and applause. Other neighbours asked us if we were all right, if any of us were hurt. The oldest, really moved, congratulated us. We stayed until late at night telling stories of what happened and telling all the other compañeros what each of us had done. We were analysing intensely what we did right, and what we were lacking. Tana proposed that we organize a tribute to the motorbike messengers who were risking their balls transporting the wounded, harassing the horses of the mounted police, transporting rocks and passing on information from one side to another. By now we knew that two of our dead compañeros were motoqueros. Quito thought that among the things that had changed were the little songs we had: That one about *A vos te queda poco Chupete botón*² wasn't going around anymore, and now we had to sing, like we had heard on one of the corners, *Qué cagazo, qué cagazo, echamos a de la Rúa, los hijos del Cordobazo*.³ So how is this going now? What do I know! As soon as we got rid of this one handful of hijos de puta there was a shitload more. I don't know. Seriously, this wasn't a social revolution the way I was exaggerating on the meeting-hall floor on Thursday. There's a long way to go before that. We know, and we've always been saying, in the movement planning sessions and in the political discussions where we talk about the future, that there's a need for social change. One of our songs says, "Throw all the bastards into the shit and let the workers rule," right? But what's for sure now is that all of us, the people, the workers, those of us who are unemployed, we're a lot stronger than before, and more ready for this social change. I think we know it and they know it, the political class and the cops, that they got hit fucking hard, and the economic powers-that-be are at least a lot more worried than before. We've already been talking about it with the compañeros. We don't really have the smallest expectation in the next government, because it'll probably dole out a lot of aid and assistance and then it'll shore up the repression again, because that's the only way to end it. That's why I think we're going to keep working every day, strengthening the movement and articulating it with other sectors, developing our own productive enterprises, without trusting a single politician or union boss who comes up and pretends to represent us, developing our own forces. Generating new social relations, building social change from the bottom up and starting now, as we say sometimes. Until we throw them all in the shit and the workers rule...

And if we lose, how is that going to happen? Because we didn't invent rebellion, that existed a long time before us. We were just talking a minute ago about the Tragic Week, about October 17, the cordobazo... And if it's like that, it's because those compañeros didn't win, right? So I think we could lose, that's for

sure, and it's possible that when my kids—who are 15, 8, 6, 4, and 3 right now—when they're my age and everything's still a mess, and it's their kids who are lacking necessities, when one of my kids starts scolding me and says, "Old man, what did your generation do when I was young and this country was a wreck?"—when they ask me something like that, I'll be able to answer them that we lost, but we gave it our all, just like we're giving the best of ourselves so things change... All right, pardon the emotion, but I get like that when I talk about my kids' future. Hey, I just realized I'm still holding onto the handkerchief I used to cover my face from the gas, it's still dirty from all the soot from the bonfires. I'm keeping this handkerchief for when my kids are grown up, a handkerchief full of dignity, like the handkerchief of the Madres, right? This dignity is the best legacy I can leave to my kids...

When all is said and done, just like we say, we're already building the social movement right now, starting from the people's action of December 20, we can say this about the victory: It's far away, but we've started to build it already.

Madar, Chase. "The Unemployed in the Popular Uprising of December, 2001: Report from Greater Buenos Aires." International Journal of Political Economy 31, no. 1 (2001): 11-23.

- 1. This refers to October 17, 1945, when a massive demonstration demanded Peron's liberation from prison. This date symbolizes the birthday of Peronism.
- 2. "Chupete, stool pigeon, you don't have much time left!" "Chupete" was the nickname for de la Rúa.
- 3. "What a fear, what a fear, we got rid of de la Rúa, the children of the Cordoba protests!"